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SUBJECT: THE ANSAR DINE MOVEMENT AND ISLAM IN MALI

REF: A. 07 BAMAKO 01223

[B](#). 07 BAMAKO 01170

[C](#). 07 BAMAKO 01336

1.(U) Summary: On June 17 the Embassy met with Cheikh Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara, the vice-president of Mali's High Islamic Council and the leader of Mali's extremely popular Ansar Dine movement. With an estimated following of over one million Malians, Haidara is perhaps the only Islamic leader in Mali capable of filling to overflow capacity Bamako's 24,000 seat football stadium. Audio tapes, CDs and videos of his sermons can be found in nearly any market or taxi-bus station in Mali. The charismatic Haidara has been an outspoken advocate for democratic openness and anti-corruption since the late 1980s when Mali's former military dictator Moussa Traore banned him from preaching. Although Haidara has been free to speak his mind since Mali's 1991-1992 democratic transition, vociferous criticism of government corruption remains a core component of his message. Another important aspect of Haidara's philosophy is his support for the controversial belief that African Muslims may pray in languages other than Arabic. His stand for social justice and defense of local languages has endeared Haidara to Mali's primarily Bambara speaking population but has annoyed many of his fellow Islamic leaders. Haidara's popularity and message make him one of the more important voices for tolerance in Mali. During our meeting he and his followers discussed the need to provide increased support for Islamic schools in Mali, their views of the United States and terrorism. End Summary.

He Who Speaks the Undeniable Truth

2.(U) Cheikh Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara has been an outspoken advocate of anti-corruption measures and democratic reform in Mali since the late 1980s. Former military dictator Moussa Traore cemented Haidara's popularity with everyday Malians in 1989 when he and the government run Malian Association for Unity and Islamic Progress (AMUPI) tried to silence Haidara by banning him from preaching in public. Haidara's followers responded by founding Ansar Dine, which can be translated as "supporters" or "defenders" of the faith, and expanding their informal network for distributing his sermons via audiocassette, thereby turning Haidara's voice into one of the most recognizable in Mali. Haidara, who is also known by the Bambara nickname "Wulibali" meaning "he who speaks the undeniable truth," regained his right to preach publicly during Mali's 1991-1992 transition to democracy. Neither the repression he suffered under Moussa Traore nor Mali's fifteen years of subsequent democratic progress have altered Haidara's fundamental themes of anti-corruption, development, tolerance and respect for Mali's traditional Islamic practices.

3.(U) Haidara estimates that Ansar Dine's membership exceeds one million people in Mali. In 2005 a western journalist estimated that Haidara and Ansar Dine were taking in as much as USD 50 million per year from supporters throughout West Africa. Haidara said contributions from members are Ansar Dine's sole source of funding. Most of his followers are likely located in central and southern Mali, although Ansar Dine has organizations in all of Mali's eight regions and more than 20 countries in Africa. The leaders of the committee charged with managing the mosque and UNESCO World Heritage site in Djenne told the Embassy last week that the vast majority of townsfolk in Djenne belonged to Ansar Dine.

4.(U) Ansar Dine is not associated with any particular religious persuasion beyond a general adherence to Sunnism. In Mali individuals who describe themselves as simply Sunni in order to distance themselves from Sufi traditions often belong to Mali's ahl-al-Sunna or "Wahhabi" community (Ref. A). Although Haidara's philosophy and preaching generally tracks with Sufi tenets, he is not interested in the semantic differences between the Tidjaniyya, Hamaliyya and Quadriyya which comprise Mali's three major Sufi traditions (Ref. B). "They are all the same," said Haidara when asked if he adhered to one Sufi persuasion. "There is no difference between one and the other."

5.(U) Haidara's emphasis on religious unity rather than division contributes to Ansar Dine's cross-cutting appeal. According to Haidara, Ansar Dine's membership includes Tidjanis, Hamallists, Quadris, Wahhabis and others who share an interest in promoting social justice and equality. This

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openness, together with Haidara's charisma, humor, willingness to take on both the political and religious establishments, and reliance on local languages rather than Arabic help explain how Haidara manages to attract, once or twice a year, enough followers to fill Bamako's 24,000 seat football stadium as well as its infield, parking lot and surrounding streets. During his March 2008 celebration of Maloud, those unable to fit within the stadium followed his sermon on giant video screens set up outside the venue.

The Message - In Bambara, Not Arabic

6.(U) Haidara's message has changed little since Mali's democratic 1991-1992 democratic transition. His sermons typically mix religious teaching with often humorous observations on political or social conditions. Haidara frequently criticizes political leaders for failing to stamp out corruption, arguing that corruption is the root cause of poverty in Africa. During his March 2008 Maloud celebration he challenged President Amadou Toumani Toure to ensure that the rule of law serves everyone and not just wealthy elites. "In a country where one single person can consume enough for one hundred people," said Haidara to a packed stadium, "any hope for development is out of the question."

7.(U) During his meeting with the Embassy Haidara referred to Mali's political leaders as "thieves who are stealing the wealth of the country." He said that while democracy has produced some improvements for the average Malian, "things still are not working very well." While many of his sermons are overtly political, and he is frequently sought out by political leaders and candidates for blessings and benedictions, Haidara refrains from endorsing individual politicians. Members of Ansar Dine, he said, are free to vote for whomever they choose.

8.(U) At times Haidara still finds himself at odds with many of his fellow Islamic leaders. One point of contention remains the ties of many Muslim leaders to the government. Haidara believes these links undermine the ability of

religious leaders to serve as independent advocates for poverty-stricken Malians. "Development will not happen," said Haidara in a not-so-subtle criticism of some Muslim leaders' unwillingness to challenge governmental authorities, "through prayer alone."

9.(U) Haidara's stance on the use of local languages during prayer has also sparked controversy. Haidara believes that Malian Muslims who are generally not fluent in Arabic should be able to pray in local languages. During his celebration of Maloud at Bamako's football stadium in March, Haidara urged his listeners not to confuse Islam with Arabism. Haidara expounded on this theme during his meeting with the Embassy. "God loves all languages," he said, "and we all love God. But we don't all love an Arab God."

Social Issues, the U.S. and Terrorism

10.(U) Like other Muslim leaders in Mali, Haidara opposes President Toure's proposal to abolish the death penalty in Mali (Ref. C). He said that he and other members of Mali's High Islamic Council planned on meeting with the President later this week to restate their opposition to abolition of the death penalty. Haidara said he was less worried about proposed changes to Mali's Family Code which would provide more equal inheritance and ownership rights to women. While Haidara indicated that he agreed with other Muslim leaders who have labeled the proposed Family Code amendments as "un-Islamic" he said he would abide by any decision made by the National Assembly provided the decision was reached democratically.

11.(U) Haidara urged the U.S. to play a greater role in supporting medersas, which are Arabic language versions of parochial schools that follow the same curriculum as Malian public schools but include an element of Islamic instruction. Haidara was pleased to hear that Deputy Assistant Secretary Todd Moss visited Abdul Aziz Yattabare, the Secretary General of the Malian Union of Medersas and the Director of the largest medersa in Mali, on June 12 and that USAID is currently working to incorporate more than 4,000 medersa teachers at over 1,200 medersas into ongoing teacher training programs in order to ensure medersa students obtain basic

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French literacy skills.

12.(U) In addition to his strong support for democratic openness, Haidara defended the secular nature of the Malian state, stating that Islam and secularism were not incompatible. He and several of his assembled supporters said religious freedom was one reason why they admired the United States. In recent years the Embassy has tried on two occasions to send Haidara to the U.S. as an International Visitor. Both times Haidara backed out at the last moment. When told that the Embassy still never understood what caused Haidara to change his mind, he smiled and said fear of flying kept him from traveling. "If I could travel to the U.S. by car or by boat," he said, "I would have gone 100 times already." His fear of airplanes has kept him from traveling to Mecca to complete the Hadj for more than eight years.

13.(U) One member of Haidara's entourage asked whether Americans understood that Islam was fundamentally a peaceful religion, despite acts of terrorism by Islamic radicals. Haidara added that violence had no place in Islam and that this is a theme he frequently raises during sermons.

Comment: An Important Voice for Tolerance

14.(SBU) Haidara is one of Mali's key communicators and an important symbol of tolerance and moderation. His reliance

on Bambara rather than Arabic, outspoken stance on issues ranging from government corruption to democratic development, ability to cut across sectarian divides, and personal charisma have made Haidara one of the most recognizable, and sought after, personalities in Mali. Although his demanding schedule - and apparent fear of flying - often prevent him from participating in U.S. Government sponsored events, we will continue to explore ways of working with Haidara to help reinforce Malians' traditional aversion to extremist messages.

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